

Lecture 2: "Rip Van Winkle" by Washington Irving

American Romanticism

- The Romantic Period in the history of American literature stretches from the end of the 18th century to the outbreak of the Civil War, which started with the publication of Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book* and ended with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.
- In this period, a new emphasis was placed upon the imaginative and emotional qualities of literature, a liking for the picturesque, the exotic, the sensuous, the sensational, the supernatural and remote past was fostered, and an increasing attention to the psychic states of their characters was paid, and above all, the individual and the common man was exalted.
- Dr. F. H. Hedge, an American transcendentalist, thought the essence of romanticism was aspiration, having its origin in wonder and mystery.
- Among the aspects of the "romantic" movement in England may be listed as a) sensibility; b) primitivism; c) love of nature; d) sympathetic interest in the past, especially the medieval; e) mysticism; and f) individualism.

Washington Irving, (born April 3, 1783, New York, New York, U.S.—died November 28, 1859, [Tarrytown](#), New York), writer called the “first American man of letters.” He is best known for the short stories “The [Legend](#) of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle.”

He wrote a series of whimsically satirical essays over the signature of Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent., published in Peter Irving’s newspaper, the *Morning Chronicle*, in 1802–03. He made several trips up the [Hudson](#), another into Canada for his health, and took an extended tour of Europe in 1804–06.

His *The History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, by *Diedrich Knickerbocker* [by Diedrich Knickerbocker](#) (1809) was a comic history of the Dutch regime in New York, prefaced by a mock-pedantic account of the world from creation onward.

[*The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*](#) (1819–20), is a collection of stories and essays that mix [satire](#) and whimsicality with fact and fiction. Most of the book's 30-odd pieces concern Irving's impressions of [England](#), but six chapters deal with American subjects. Of these, the tales "[The Legend of Sleepy Hollow](#)" and "[Rip Van Winkle](#)" have been called the first American short stories. They are both Americanized versions of German folktales. The main character of "Rip Van Winkle" is a henpecked husband who sleeps for 20 years and awakes as an old man to find his wife dead, his daughter happily married, and America now an independent country. The tremendous success of *The Sketch Book* in both England and the United States assured Irving that he could live by his pen. In 1822 he produced *Bracebridge Hall*, a sequel to *The Sketch Book*. He traveled in Germany, Austria, France, Spain, the [British Isles](#), and later in his own country.

The major themes of the story have to do with the status of America as a free nation. Before he fell asleep America was a colony under the control of the tyrannical rule of Great Britain. The period of his sleep was the period of the revolution and during the post-revolution period he went back to his country and his people to find his wife dead (who could be read as a symbol of the British control) and talks of freedom and democracy which were new to him. The descriptions of nature reveal the ideals of escapism and isolation which are favoured by the romantic authors. Rip found happiness and peace in nature, he felt safe from the clamours of his wife and could explore the beauty of the supernatural when he met the little elves. The Hudson river is also a reference to legend and to the past, when it's referred to as "majestic" and "silent", qualities of the great leader Henry Hudson.

- **Assignment:** Analyze the text below following the full method of literary analysis and extract the aspects of Romanticism.

"Rip Van Winkle", From *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1820)

Washington Irving (April 3, 1783 – November 28, 1859)

"... He inherited, however, but little of the martial character of his ancestors. I have observed that he was a simple good-natured man; he was, moreover, a kind neighbor, and an obedient hen-pecked husband."

"Certain it is, that he was a great favorite among all the good wives of the village, who, as usual with the amiable sex, took his part in all family squabbles; and never failed, whenever they talked those matters over in their evening gossipings, to lay all the blame on Dame Van Winkle. The children of the village, too, would shout with joy whenever he approached. He assisted at their sports, made their playthings, taught them to fly kites and shoot marbles, and told them long stories of ghosts, witches, and Indians. Whenever he went dodging about the village, he was surrounded by a troop of them, hanging on his skirts, clambering on his back, and playing a thousand tricks on him with impunity; and not a dog would bark at him throughout the neighborhood." (9-10)

... "Poor Rip was [...] reduced almost to despair; and his only alternative, to escape from the labor of the farm and the clamor of his wife, was to take gun in hand and stroll away into the woods. Here he would sometimes seat himself at the foot of a tree, and share the contents of his wallet with Wolf, with whom he sympathized as a fellow-sufferer in persecution. "Poor Wolf," he would say, "thy mistress leads thee a dog's life of it; but never mind, my lad, whilst I live thou shalt never want a friend to stand by thee!" Wolf would wag his tail, look wistfully in his master's face, and if dogs can feel pity I verily believe he reciprocated the sentiment with all his heart. In a long ramble of the kind on a fine autumnal day, Rip had unconsciously scrambled to one of the highest parts of the Kaatskill mountains. He was after his favorite sport of squirrel shooting, and the still solitudes had echoed and re-echoed with the reports of his gun. Panting and fatigued, he threw himself, late in the afternoon, on a green knoll, covered with mountain herbage, that crowned the brow of a precipice. From an opening between the trees he could overlook all the lower country for many a mile of rich woodland. He saw at a distance the lordly Hudson, far, far below him, moving on its silent but majestic course, with the reflection of a purple cloud, or the sail of a lagging bark, here and there sleeping on its glassy bosom, and at last losing itself in the blue highlands. On the other side he looked down into a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs, and scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun. For some time Rip lay musing on this scene; evening was gradually advancing; the mountains began to throw their long blue shadows over the valleys; he saw that it would be dark long before he could reach the village, and he heaved a heavy sigh when he thought of encountering the terrors of Dame Van Winkle." (13-14)

... "On entering the amphitheatre, new objects of wonder presented themselves. On a level spot in the centre was a company of odd-looking personages playing at nine-pins.

They were dressed in quaint outlandish fashion; some wore short doublets, others jerkins, with long knives in their belts, and most of them had enormous breeches, of similar style with that of the guide's. Their visages, too, were peculiar; one had a large head, broad face, and small piggish eyes; the face of another seemed to consist entirely of nose, and was surmounted by a white sugar-loaf hat, set off with a little red cock's tail. They all had beards, of various shapes and colors. There was one who seemed to be the commander. He was a stout old gentleman, with a weather-beaten countenance; he wore a laced doublet, broad belt and hanger, high-crowned hat and feather, red stockings, and high-heeled shoes, with roses in them. The whole group reminded Rip of the figures in an old Flemish painting, in the parlor of Dominie Van Schaick, the village parson, and which had been brought over from Holland at the time of the settlement. What seemed particularly odd to Rip was, that though these folks were evidently amusing themselves, yet they maintained the gravest face, the most mysterious silence, and were, withal, the most melancholy party of pleasure he had ever witnessed. Nothing interrupted the stillness of the scene but the noise of the balls, which, whenever they were rolled, echoed along the mountains like rumbling peals of thunder."

[Rip wakes up after 20 years but is still not aware of how long he slept]

...“At length he reached to where the ravine had opened through the cliffs to the amphitheatre; but no traces of such opening remained. The rocks presented a high impenetrable wall, over which the torrent came tumbling in a sheet of feathery foam, and fell into a broad deep basin, black from the shadows of the surrounding forest. Here, then, poor Rip was brought to a stand. He again called and whistled after his dog; he was only answered by the cawing of a flock of idle crows, sporting high in the air about a dry tree that overhung a sunny precipice; and who, secure in their elevation, seemed to look down and scoff at the poor man's perplexities. What was to be done? the morning was passing away, and Rip felt famished for want of his breakfast. He grieved to give up his dog and gun; he dreaded to meet his wife; but it would not do to starve among the mountains. He shook his head, shouldered the rusty firelock, and, with a heart full of trouble and anxiety, turned his steps homeward.” (16-17)

...“As he approached the village he met a number of people, but none whom he knew, which somewhat surprised him, for he had thought himself acquainted with every one in the country round. Their dress, too, was of a different fashion from that to which he was accustomed. They all stared at him with equal marks of surprise, and whenever they cast their eyes upon him, invariably stroked their chins. The constant recurrence of this gesture induced Rip, involuntarily, to do the same, when, to his astonishment, he found his beard had grown a foot long! He had now entered the skirts of the village. A troop of strange children ran at his heels, hooting after him, and pointing at his gray beard. The dogs, too, not one of which he recognized for an old acquaintance, barked at him as he passed. The very village was altered; it was larger and more populous. There were rows of houses which he had never seen before, and those which had been his familiar haunts had disappeared. Strange names were over the doors—strange faces at the windows—every thing was strange. His mind now misgave him; he began to doubt whether both he and the world around him were not bewitched. Surely this was his native village, which he had left but the day before. There stood the Kaatskill

mountains—there ran the silver Hudson at a distance—there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always been—Rip was sorely perplexed—“That flagon last night,” thought he, “has addled my poor head sadly!” (17-18)

...“Rip’s heart died away at hearing of these sad changes in his home and friends, and finding himself thus alone in the world. Every answer puzzled him too, by treating of such enormous lapses of time, and of matters which he could not understand: war—Congress—Stony Point;—he had no courage to ask after any more friends, but cried out in despair, “Does nobody here know Rip Van Winkle?” “Oh, Rip Van Winkle!” exclaimed two or three, “Oh, to be sure! that’s Rip Van Winkle yonder, leaning against the tree.” Rip looked, and beheld a precise counterpart of himself, as he went up the mountain: apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged. The poor fellow was now completely confounded. He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man. In the midst of his bewilderment, the man in the cocked hat demanded who he was, and what was his name? “God knows,” exclaimed he, at his wit’s end; “I’m not myself—I’m somebody else—that’s me yonder—no—that’s somebody else got into my shoes—I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they’ve changed my gun, and every thing’s changed, and I’m changed, and I can’t tell what’s my name, or who I am!” (21)